

# The Word of the LORD was Rare in those Days

Hespeler, January 14, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday after the Epiphany

[1 Samuel 3:1-20](#), Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

**C**ould you possibly find a more alarming outlook on the status of religion than the one that opens our reading this morning from First Samuel? **“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”** Yes, I know, people come to religious sanctuaries for a variety of reasons. Some are looking for a brief escape from the troubles of life. Some are happy to be seen there by others so that they will be well-regarded. Some may just enjoy the nostalgic feeling of being there.

That is all well and good. But if there is not a moment, at least from time to time, when the voice of God just breaks through and people receive a vision or hear a word and they know that it has come from God, then what is the point? But we are told that **“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”**

## Irrelevance

Is that not an indication that faith in the God of Israel had become irrelevant? Sure, there were still some people who came out to the sanctuary and went through all the proper motions of the worship of Yahweh, but it had become just a matter of tradition and habit. People are not having an encounter with God. So, what was the point?

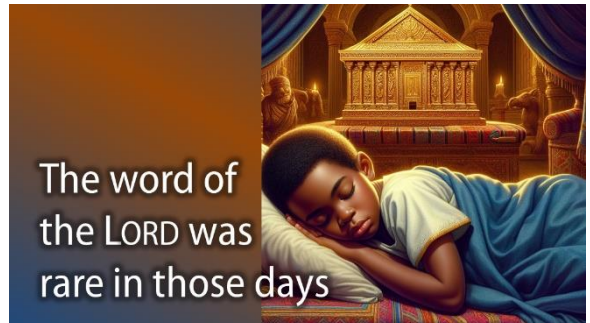
That description of the problem particularly struck me when I read it because it seemed familiar. Is that not precisely the complaint that many raise about the state of the Christian church in our society today? It is irrelevant! People are just going through the motions! People just don't get from it what they really need.

I don't necessarily agree that all of that is true, but the complaints are raised often enough that we cannot just brush them off. So, let us take a look at what had gone wrong at the sanctuary at Shiloh in the days when Samuel was a child there. Maybe there will be some other points of connection that speak to our situation.

## Eli's Blindness

So, why was **“the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”** We have an indication almost immediately after the problem is stated. It says of Eli, the priest in charge of the sanctuary at Shiloh, that his **“eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see.”**

And I know that you could just understand that as a description of a common age-related disability back when things like cataract surgery and eyeglasses were undreamt of. But I think that a careful reading of the story makes it clear that this is not just about a visual impairment.



For one thing, the note about Eli's eyesight comes so quickly after the statement about visions not being widespread that you can't help but make the connection. Eli's problem is not that he has a physical disability. The state of his eyesight is symbolic of a deeper, much more spiritual problem that he has.

And this is borne out as you continue into the story and if you read the larger context. There are clearly many things at the sanctuary at Shiloh that Eli isn't seeing, but the reason has nothing to do with his eyesight. Above all, he chooses not to see what his sons are doing.

## Eli's Children's Abuse

Hophni and Phinehas, his adult children, have taken over priestly duties from their father. But they have made it a habit to abuse their power. They are using their authority as priests over the sacrifice to extort the best cuts of meat from the worshippers for themselves. And, much worse, but distressingly familiar, they are using their positions to rape and abuse the young women who participate in the life of the sanctuary.

I know that you sometimes get the impression that the whole phenomenon of religious leaders using their power and authority to abuse the people who are placed in their spiritual care is a modern problem. It never used to be discussed; it never even came up. Whereas in more recent years, we've seen it happening everywhere. So much so, that I'm probably safe to say that every major denomination and religious group has had its own share of scandals in this regard over the last few decades.

But, as the case of Hophni and Phinehas should make clear, this is not because abuse of spiritual authority is a modern invention. It has always happened. Whenever a certain group of people are given an extraordinary amount of power over others, there will be a certain proportion who will be tempted to abuse that power.

As we've seen, it can happen in almost any organization. There have been lots of scandals in hockey and other sports, in the business world and in various youth organizations. We might like to think that churches should be exempt, but they're clearly not. In some ways, the spiritual dimension of religious authority does have a way of amplifying the potential.

## Eli's Inaction

So, what the sons of Eli have been doing with their priestly authority is horrific. But they are not the biggest problem, at least not as far as this story posits. The problem is the blindness of Eli. Not his physical blindness, but his refusal to see what his sons are doing and to put a stop to it.

God says that explicitly to Samuel: **"For I have told [Eli] that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."**

That is the real sign of a sick institution. It is not the evil that some individuals do, it is the failure of the institution itself, which is what Eli represents, to safeguard everyone the institution touches. When we prefer blindness, when we refuse to see or to challenge what some powerful people are doing in any organization, that is the root of the problem.

## Shifting our Focus

And if it is at all true of the church today that the word of the LORD is rare in these days and visions are not widespread, that has to be part of the reason. The church has wanted to pursue power and authority and has enabled its most influential leaders to that end. Some of those leaders have used that power and authority to serve themselves. Thus, the church is brought into disrepute, and it can no longer speak the word of God.

But if we can learn some humility, and if we can learn to shift from protecting our own privilege and authority to protecting vulnerable people, I do believe that, as we make ourselves vulnerable to God, God's voice will break through to us. When we stop looking after ourselves first, we will be set free to look for the visions that God will send us. That is where the healing begins both for Shiloh and for us.

## Samuel and the Ark

But that is not the only reason why the word of the LORD was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. We see another big indication of what had gone wrong in the story itself. Samuel, this young boy who has been devoted to service in the sanctuary by his mother, is apparently sleeping somewhere in the temple complex and he is in the same room as the Ark of the Covenant.

Now, I don't know if that set off alarm bells for you when you read it, but it certainly did for me. If you are at all familiar with the Ark of the Covenant, you know that it was the primary symbol of the presence of God with the people of Israel. According to what it says elsewhere, the Ark was to be kept in a special chamber in the temple (or at this point in time in the Tabernacle) called the holy of holies. God was said to be more present there than anywhere else on earth.

## The Day of Atonement

How holy was it? It was so holy that no one ever entered the place except one day a year, the Day of Atonement. On this day and only this day, the High Priest was to enter into the presence of the ark only after carrying out an atoning sacrifice.

But even then, they took special precautions. Before the High Priest entered, the temple servants would tie a rope around his ankle just in case God decided to strike him down. That way they wouldn't have to wait an entire year for the next High Priest to go in and remove the body. Now, we don't actually know if that rope story was true or just a legend that spread. It's not actually in the Bible. But, true or not, it is certainly an indication of the kind of respect that they had for the Ark and the care they took when in its presence.

But there seems to be none of that reverence or expectation in this story. The Ark seems to simply be in some random room in the temple complex – a room that also appears to be a dormitory for acolytes like Samuel who serve there. There seems to be no indication whatsoever of any expectation that this cultic object could allow someone to have an encounter with God. They have either forgotten or they never knew that such a thing was possible.

## Why it Takes so Long

Which is why, when it actually happens, it takes so long for anyone to even recognize it for what it is. Samuel just assumes that it is Eli, the revered elder priest, who is calling out for assistance in the night.

You can't really blame Samuel for that, of course. He's just a child and has never had any reason to even dream of such things. No, the real person to blame is once again poor blind Eli. If only he could have seen – and I am not talking about the physical sight that had failed him but the more important inner sight that had failed – if only he could have seen, perhaps the voice of God would have broken through sooner. But, no, it takes three tries – three times when God calls out to the sleeping Samuel – before Eli finally figures out that something else might be going on here.

## Our Inner Blindness

Now what does any of this have to do with the crisis we face in the church where we seem to be living in days when the word of the LORD is rare; visions are not widespread? I am a firm believer that God has never ceased to speak to God's people. Visions have never ceased to be sent. But if we do not expect them, will we receive them? And if, like Eli, we suffer from inner blindness, it will be all that much harder.

And what does that inner blindness look like for us? What might be preventing us from detecting the words and actions and power of God at work among us? Often, I suspect, it is because the eyes of our hearts are diverted and looking for meaning elsewhere. For the church as an institution, our focus may be fixed on our own standing within society as we mourn a loss of power and influence.

As individual believers, we become distracted by the temptations of our consumer society. We get caught up in the endless scramble to build wealth or flee from poverty which has become the only concern of our capitalist society. Above all the voice of God gets drowned out by the incessant noise of our social media-driven perpetual misinformation machine and confirmation bias.

## The Right Response

All of these things mean that we do not expect God to speak to us or send us any visions that might contradict what we have already decided to believe. That is why the word of the LORD is rare in our days; visions are not widespread. It is not because God does not speak but because we will not listen.

But there is still hope for us. Eli, as blind as he was, figured it out eventually. And when he taught Samuel to respond and say, **“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening,”** I don't think he was just trying to teach the boy. He was trying to teach himself as well. He had finally gotten to the place where he was willing to hear what God had to say no matter what it cost him – and it did cost him a great deal. That is what finally allowed the voice of God would break through. That is what will allow it to break through for us as well.